

DTMp: A Comenius 2.1 Project to Produce a Differentiated Teaching Module for Primary School Trainee Teachers

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As European classrooms become more heterogeneous, the movement towards inclusive education becomes more urgent as well as more challenging. This paper describes the process of developing and running a proposal for a Comenius 2.1 project aimed at developing training materials for the preparation of pre-service teachers in responding to diversity in primary classrooms. The project, started in October 2004, has collected the concerns and experiences of responding to diversity of 35 teachers (5 each from 7 different countries) through semi-structured interviews, and produced the first draft of a multilingual handbook for trainees. The handbook in hard copy and web-based format, will be piloted in 2005-06 in the seven participating countries, namely Malta (coordinator), Czech Republic, Germany, Lithuania, Netherlands, Sweden and the UK. This paper will focus on the process of trans-European sharing of research and development of the training course.

Introduction

The project was conceived during a Research and Development meeting among a group of researchers interested in inclusive education from Greece, Sweden, Lithuania, USA and Malta during the Annual European Conference of the *Association for Teacher Education in Europe* in Malta in August 2003. The group identified as a big challenge to current teachers the need to meet the needs of a diversity of pupils in today's European classrooms (Meijer 2003, see Tomlinson 1999, for the same issue in the USA). The following statement was drawn up:

1. Issues concerning the education of children with special educational needs are now seen as fully intertwined with issues of responding to the diversity of needs of all students or *inclusive education*. The title of the RDC 7 should indicate this: *'Teacher education for special*

educational needs and inclusive education.'

2. However, while this has given rise to more talk about inclusive education, the research studies from different education systems and countries show that a substantial number of children remain excluded from regular school activities.
3. Two exclusionary factors identified were that:
 - a. There is an increasing emphasis on *standardisation* of curriculum and assessment and on academic achievement which is discouraging teachers from using their professional discretion to address the holistic and particular needs of individuals or groups;
 - b. Many teachers still feel *ill-equipped, isolated* and *unsupported* to address the diversity of students needs.
4. The RDC members felt that there should be more action and research on how to enable teachers and schools to respond more effectively to the diversity of students needs. Such research has to address issues of *adaptation* of curricula and *teaching and assessment methodology*, and *classroom organisation and management*, and therefore involve in-service training for teachers as well as new initiatives in initial teacher preparation.
5. The following two foci were seen as providing forward movement:
 - a. There must be opportunities (i.e. structured time) for *dialogue* – listening and feedback – between the teacher and each student, among students, among teachers, between teachers and administration, between teachers and parents, between school staff and the community. Collaborative learning among students and partnership among teachers and other staff should be encouraged.
 - b. Lifelong professional development of teachers must include opportunities for the development of

expertise in sensitivity to holistic student needs, and skills in classroom management and organisation and orchestration of learning activity for responding to the diversity of student interests, needs and potentials, within a socially supportive and safe learning environment.

At that same meeting it was agreed that we would develop a Comenius 2.1 project to address the above need. Comenius 2.1 funding is intended for European cooperation projects for the training of school education staff. A preparatory meeting among potential partners was held in Greece in December 2003 where the proposal for a 3-year project was drawn up and submitted to the EU in February 2004. The project was accepted and is running from October 2004 to September 2007.

Project objectives

The project was intended to enable teachers to acquire the new competencies identified by, among others, the Progress Report of the EC Directorate General for Education and Culture, Working Group on 'Improving the Education of Teachers and Trainers' (November 2003). The Working Group, having noted that teachers are faced with increasingly heterogeneous classes made up of socially, culturally and ethnically diverse pupils, recommended that teachers develop a new competence:

The competence to deal with this diversification of the school/training centre population implies that they should adapt their teaching/training to the diversity of pupils'/ trainees' needs and differentiate the strategies employed; that they abandon the more traditional class teaching/training in which the same standard learning situation is offered to all, and, instead, become able to organise classes in groups or even to individualize learning opportunities. ... (p.35)

This change in approach will not happen unless pre-service and in-service teachers are provided with appropriate pedagogical training. Because teacher trainers themselves also experience the challenge of diversity as a new challenge, it is very important for pedagogists engaged in inclusive education to enable colleagues to address the new need by providing training and information that can be gradually adopted by those who teach subject methodology.

The situation called for an innovative project. First of all, while there is an increasing literature on why and how teachers should adopt a differentiated teaching approach, there is a need for a training package that can be used in pre- and in-service training of teachers in actual classrooms. Secondly, there is a need for materials linked more closely to a European context since there is much less than in the USA. Thirdly, such materials and training can be more easily promoted if it is available on the internet.

Project design

The official project title adopted was: 'DTMp: Differentiated Teaching Module - Primary: Preparing trainee teachers to respond to pupil diversity.' The project consists of concurrent activities in research and the production of training materials.

Teacher interviews

In the first year, all partners first carried out research to identify training and support resources required by teachers for responding to the diversity of pupil needs arising from different backgrounds, interests, abilities, learning styles, and impairments. This consisted of a qualitative in-depth

interview with five primary school teachers from each of the seven participating EU countries. The interview schedule was developed at a meeting of the seven project partners and piloted with a teacher from each country. An analysis of the first interview from each country was used to develop a common coding system which was then applied to the rest of the interviews: the findings are reported in another paper.

Trainees Handbook

In the past year also, the partners worked concurrently on the development of a teacher-training package (Handbook for Trainees and Manual for Trainers) aimed at enabling teachers to prepare, implement and evaluate the impact of lessons intended to engage and empower all students.

The trainees handbook will consist of 20 sessions divided into four parts: (1) An introductory section will stimulate teachers' reflection on responding to diversity, and present the course content, structure and process as an action-research approach to professional development in this area. (2) The second section constitutes the mainly 'theoretical' part of the course aimed at the construction of appropriate knowledge and attitudes. It is aimed at stimulating reflection on the need for inclusive education also within the European dimension, the holistic nature of children's development, the various forms and levels of diversity of students and learning contexts such as multiple intelligences and learning styles, the constructive nature of learning and emotional intelligence, and the use of a design-for-all curriculum and formative assessment. This section is intended to stimulate self development in the trainee towards a greater appreciation of the need for responding to student diversity, an attitude that the team regards as an essential element in enabling teachers to become truly responsive in the classroom. (3) A third section focuses on the development of skills competencies in responsive teaching. This practical section is important as an enabling element as it engages the teacher in trying to apply aspects of responsive theory to actual plans for classroom learning, their implementation during teaching practice, and evaluation of their effectiveness in reaching all students. Specific skills addressed include: developing an inclusive culture in the classroom; skills for assessing the students' interests, patterns of learning and learning strengths and needs, together with an assessment of prior learning in the relevant domain; skills for adapting content, process and product of learning to enable all students to be engaged and make progress. Emphasis will be put on the skill of empowering students to take responsibility for their own learning. Another set of skills will be those of creating networking and mobilising support for students with individual educational needs. (4) A final section attempts to help the teacher to put together his or her understanding and skills constructed through the previous sections into the design of whole units and lessons. It is dedicated to evaluations of observed or videoed actual lessons in terms of how far there was a response to student strengths and needs; and the actual carrying out of assessments of possible groups of students you might be involved with, and to the preparation of actual lesson plans aimed at responding to the diversity of student strengths and needs. The tasks include reflecting on their teaching practice experience in relation to responding to student diversity.

This Handbook is being produced in the 7 different languages and will be implemented by two members from each participating partner institution with groups of pre- or in-service teachers in the 7 different countries. Its implementation will be evaluated and then disseminated as a module in hard copy and web-based format, in 7 languages, for use by all teacher trainers in both pre- and in-service courses.

The project aims to develop the module as an internet-

based package that can be accessed for use as an essential part of the curriculum offered by teacher training institutions. It is intended to empower both pre-service teachers and their trainers to take on the responsibility of responding to student diversity in an informed and inclusive framework. A separate trainers' manual will set out a scheme for using the teachers' handbook together with face to face interaction or interaction over the internet to enable teachers to take on board diversity as a resource rather than as a problem. While intended as a general pedagogy module, it is expected that its availability over the internet will also empower subject methodology experts to adopt the challenge of responding to student diversity as part of their regular pedagogical expertise.

The project is also expected to enable a wider ongoing network of collaboration on the development of tools for promoting differentiated teaching and inclusive educational practices across Europe.

Working trans-nationally on the project

This project started off with six partners at the preparatory meeting in Greece in December 2003, included nine partners at its first meeting in Seville in December 2004, and is now made up of seven partners, namely the Universities of Leipzig (Germany), Manchester (UK), Inholland (Netherlands), Dalarna (Sweden), Marijampole College (Lithuania), and the NGO Motivace - Zivotni Styl (Czech Republic).

This project, like other transnational projects, presents a new challenge to those used to working in one language and culture. The project was planned as a multicultural and multilingual project. So the team is faced concretely with the challenge it is trying to address of diversity even in its own work. Though the medium of team communication is English, we have to understand the difficulties that this presents to those for whom English is a foreign language and the need, for instance, not to talk too rapidly – a very common experience of children from other language backgrounds in schools.

More importantly we have learnt to watch our language because of the different concepts that can be evoked by different vocabulary. It was difficult to find terminology we could all agree on. We did in the end agree on the main term 'Responsive teaching' though this was then found to be already being used as 'Culturally responsive teaching' – which was indeed part of our concern.

A major difficulty cropped up in the use of existing literature. We are not just writing a paper and referring to the different sources of literature. We need to make the literature available to our students and also among ourselves. But you cannot translate each piece of literature. Thus for instance, our Swedish colleague was trying to use a paper on how to act as critical friend, but found there was no ready translation in English and we could not use it.

We have tried to have each partner do a literature search in his or her own language and try to find relevant literature that lecturers and students can make use of. However, even this is not enough when one uses the internet. English resources on the internet are much wider and in the language of smaller nations, such as Maltese, Czech and Lithuanian, it is much more restricted. Here is how one of our colleagues, on reading some of the scripts for the handbook, brought up the dilemma in a very nice and respectful way about non-English speakers:

Thank you for all your information. You really care very much about all of us. You work so much. I did not study carefully all the contributions which you have sent to us yet, but I feel that I should say something. ... This is the first thing what I need to say.

But - a question is - to whom is this project prepared? It seems

to me that it is mostly for English speaking countries. Excuse me, please, but it looks like this. There are sometimes so often links to web sites which are naturally in English - I understand it, but do you think that students - participants from not English speaking countries will be so equipped with English that they will be able to use it? Shouldn't we consider it? If we will not consider it - it seems to me that it is against the purpose of the project. It will not be differentiated teaching. It will be excluding.... My head is full of this. I wanted to open this question in Manchester but it seems to me that it is necessary to open it as early as possible - as people are working on their contributions and this is an important thing.

One of our colleagues suggested a possible solution of each partner supplying local literature while acknowledging the difficulty this created in practically requiring each one to write the whole handbook himself or herself:

I think X has raised a very good point which we need to think very carefully about. I experienced something similar on another e-learning project involving Beijing University in China, where the participants were Chinese teachers. In this case we set up a system where our Chinese colleagues acquired 'equivalent' texts and/or websites - that is, materials that have roughly the same content as the English language materials but were written in Chinese. So in this project the participants were given a choice - if they were confident with their English they could choose to access the English materials, or they could opt for the Chinese equivalents if they preferred. This may be a potential solution for us. The only problem is of course that it requires colleagues in each partner country to locate equivalent texts/websites - something which would take time. ...

Indeed we have learnt that, even if only translation is required, this will involve much more extra work and longer time for processing material to be used by the team. Teamwork becomes slower, but has to respect these extra demands if multi-language work is to be truly achieved.

Apart from the language itself, we have the challenge of enriching ourselves with the different cultures themselves, each with different values to different concepts. Even the idea of inclusion itself: one interpretation was that this was a concept used by the powerful in the western world to actually maintain the status quo while appearing to show concern about marginalised groups. At lower levels we have different meanings for concepts such as Individual Educational Planning, since in Sweden, for instance, there is the concept of having individualisation for each student rather than just for student with special educational needs.

A third transnational diversity aspect related to the above is the different types of practices in teacher training and school organisation: as we are concerned with bringing about changes, we have to find common grounds as well as allow for different ways of doing things. For instance, we found very different ways in which trainee teachers do their fieldwork: some do it in full-time blocks of a few weeks, others do them in a day or two a week over the year; yet others do not get full days but rather spots of practice of different elements of teaching. We should also say that our project is allowing for both pre- and in-service implementation of the training package.

A final important aspect of working trans-nationally is how to establish trustful relationships, particularly when the team consists of a relatively large number – we started with 9 partners – and people are meeting for the first time. In fact there were some strains at our first meeting: in fact two of our esteemed partners decided to leave the project. There was much more trust at our second meeting, which was built on the experience of the first meeting plus the many email communications and sharing of work over the internet that took place in the 6 months between the meetings. In this there

was also the help of our website which included a forum as well as a resource data base that could be shared as the result of the team's endeavour.

One of the ways in which our teamwork has been strengthened is through the use of the strengths of each team member. The team members have different working styles: We have some members who are very organised and call for structure in our work, and others who are more intuitive in the search for solutions: both approaches have enriched our project. Some are more impulsive with ideas while others are more reflective, and again this can be enriching but here one has to be careful to allow the more reflective ones to make their contribution also in discussions. We have some who are good at writing, others who are good at using the internet or other equipment like cameras. Our teamwork has also been aided by the contribution of team members who take care to nurture relationships – showing appreciation for contributions of others, noting the particular needs of some members, or noting the group's need for a break etc. It is the combination of the different characteristics of team members that has ensured our success in working together.

Evaluation of project products and processes

In order to ensure quality work, evaluation is essential, and is indeed required by the EU Commission. We have been involved in two forms of evaluation.

First of all we have tried to ensure a good *team process* by evaluating our meetings. Though partners felt that they generally had a good opportunity for participation at the meetings, there was feedback after our first meeting in Seville that more small group work at our meetings would ensure more active input by all members, and more production of work. At the next meeting, the need for breaks from lengthy working sessions was highlighted.

Secondly, we are engaged in evaluating our products. This evaluation first of all occurs through the democratic process of our teamwork, so that we are constantly giving feedback to each other on ideas and products. This was also formalised at our Manchester meeting when we decided to have critical friends for each one's writing up of sections. In addition we also have a more formal external evaluation: Our first draft design of the trainees' handbook and teacher interview schedule were evaluated by a colleague from each partner institution. As soon as our handbook second draft is completed after the Amsterdam meeting (October 2005), it will be submitted to another evaluator regarding appropriateness and potential effectiveness.

An important aspect of the evaluation will consist of the feedback from the implementation of the course and use of the Handbook: each lecturer will be giving feedback through a self-evaluation journal, as well as feedback from the trainees and from the children they will be teaching.

In the end there will be a final external evaluation of the whole revised package, both in terms of the content and process of the course as a whole, as well as a web-based module in particular.

Dissemination

We would finally like the module to be used as widely as possible in teacher training across Europe and beyond. This too requires specific procedures. This paper is an attempt to make the module known to as many teacher trainers as possible. We have also already presented the first outcomes

of the teacher interviews through a paper presented at the International School Psychology Association Colloquium in Greece in July this year. And information on the project was also communicated by the coordinator at the Inclusive and Supportive Education Conference in Glasgow last August.

One of our strategies has been the set up of a website, www.dtmp.org, through which it is easier to communicate our project and developments. We have in this way made contact with people involved in similar work in UNESCO as well as other EU projects.

It is planned to have a further progress report on the project at the next ATEE Conference in 2006, as well as to organise a specific Conference in Malta in 2007 to promote the use of the module among teacher trainers across Europe. It is also intended that the findings from the interviews will be published in relevant journals.

It is also intended to widen the use of the module in each partner's institution and country. This process was already started through the engagement of colleague evaluators as well as in the inclusion of a colleague in the implementation phase. It is expected that the module will become a regular part of teacher training courses in each partner institution and in other institutions in the partner countries. In addition, it is expected that the module will become a very useful tool for in-service courses across Europe. For instance, in Malta there is the possibility that the module will be offered as in-service to a wide section of educational staff across the whole education system.

Conclusion

The DTMP project is aimed at enabling teachers to respond to student diversity. It has produced a first draft of its two main products: a picture of how teachers across Europe, who are trying to reach all their children, may perceive the challenge; and a handbook for reflection, planning, action and evaluation of efforts to respond to each student in the classroom. The next step is now crucial: implementing the training package with pre- and in-service teachers faced with real classrooms. There is a general feeling among the seven partners that the challenge is worthwhile, and that the extra work and effort that has been required so far to engage in this project has been an enriching experience as each partner has already benefited from the multicultural perspective on inclusive education practice across European classrooms. We all hope to transmit this appreciation of the richness of our own diversity through the multi-cultural and multi-language module that we are producing for teachers and their trainers.

References

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